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Remembering Stephanie

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REMEMBERING STEPHANIE

SUSAN POLSINELLI

Professor Aleong was a teacher long before she graced the halls of Emory Law School or Nova Southeastern. I know this because I was one of her first pupils. It was 1998 and I was Susan Schnell, a shiny new Assistant State Attorney for Miami-Dade County, Florida, fresh out of the University of Virginia, one of those law schools “up north.” She was Stephanie Feldman, one of the “Chiefs” of the DUI/Crimes Division, the training grounds for all new Miami ASAs. And although she was younger than I was (and shorter), that made her my boss.

As Steph would tell it, that fateful first day, she looked out into the room of forty plus eager new prosecutors, and somehow picked me out of the crowd. She said that in those first moments, although she should have been thinking about a thousand other things more pertinent to the job ahead, she was instead thinking to herself that she and I were going to be fast friends.

Stephanie was a woman of great faith, so I never doubted for a moment that she had a premonition about me and about our future. Those of you who knew her, or knew of her, would also know that she was also a woman of great determination. And so, whether it was destiny, determination, or just my good luck, I think I can fast forward in this story to tell you that we became dear and enduring friends.

For three years, we shared our daily lives. We worked together, we shopped (a bit too often given our salaries), we dined (lots of sushi), and listened to goofy 90s pop songs like Ricky Martin’s *La Vida Loca* (one of Steph’s favorites at the time). When I left Miami with my husband-to-be to move to Manhattan, we continued our friendship from a distance.

I loved and adored Steph as a friend, but what was more unusual about this friendship was how much inspiration I drew from her example. Even in her twenties Stephanie got more accomplished in a day than many of us get done in a week. She was energized from the tips of her toes to the top of her blonde head. Those who knew and loved her understood that her seemingly limitless energy was fueled by her passion—passion for her family, for her friends, and for the causes that she believed in.

As an Assistant State Attorney, Stephanie was a young, inexperienced lawyer who was in a position to exercise a great deal of discretion and have tremendous impact on the lives of hundreds of crime victims and criminal defendants. Stephanie approached her duties with unwavering professionalism, unyielding precision, and a flawless moral compass. Stephanie advocated ferociously on behalf of the crime victims that she helped, and more than any other lawyer I know, she became personally involved with the cause

of improving lives and helping crime victims put shattered pieces back together.

The excellence of her work was rewarded at the State Attorney's Office where she was offered (and gladly accepted) leadership positions that allowed her to move up the ranks with lightning speed (and grace). When she left the office in Miami to go to the Statewide Prosecutor's Office, she had already amassed the skills, knowledge, and street-smarts to spearhead a task-force that was so effective in protecting the integrity of pharmaceuticals that her efforts were documented in the book *Dangerous Doses*.¹

I will leave it to her other friends and colleagues to tell you their accounts of her career as a law professor at Emory and Nova Southeastern. I observed these events only from a distance. But what I will mention, and what was most remarkable to me about her time as a law professor, was the seemingly endless array of students that she took under her wing. I have catalogued years of zany sitcom-like problems presented by her law students. Invariably, Professor Aleong was there to steadily guide them through these amusing (at least to me) events. I would note that she was also there for them when their lives and their families were truly in crisis.

In all of those years of conversation, I wasn't at all surprised to hear about her level of engagement with her students. Stripping aside her brilliance and her accomplishments, Stephanie at her core was a wonderful friend and advocate, and I am sure that those qualities helped shape the direction of many lives and careers.

Stephanie's professional accomplishments and impact are obvious when you look at tributes like the "Stephanie F. Aleong, J.D., National Patient Safety Award" that is given by the Nova Southeastern College of Pharmacy in her memory each year, or the publication of this volume of the *Nova Law Review* featuring articles on health law topics that were near and dear to Stephanie, or even the hundreds of friends, loved-ones, and admirers who packed her memorial service.

On a personal level, her memory is with me in the large and small moments of my life. At turning points, I find myself aspiring to her high-impact, activist approach to life. In the small moments, when I am exhausted and I don't want to finish a tedious project for my work, I think of her endless energy. I think of her when I feel too drained to sit down on the floor with my boys to play a game or put together a puzzle. When a task seems too difficult or too intimidating, I conjure up my memories of Stephanie and

1. KATHERINE EBAN, *DANGEROUS DOSES: HOW COUNTERFEITERS ARE CONTAMINATING AMERICA'S DRUG SUPPLY* (2005).

I think about how quickly and methodically she would attack the situation and just get it done.

She is my siren in other ways too. Stephanie possessed boundless energy, enthusiasm, and a capacity to love that I have seldom run into in life. If you had been at her memorial service, you couldn't have helped noticing how many of her beloved stood up to talk about how fiercely loyal, giving, and loving Stephanie was to all those who she took into her heart.

She was the woman who would drop everything to help a friend (and later, a student). She was the kind of person would drive miles out of her way without question if it meant that someone whom she cared about would have an easier time of it. And Steph would never skip a birthday or a holiday or any special occasion that would allow her to make a fuss and show her friends and family how much she cared.

Stephanie was exceptional in that she committed her heart and soul to her relationships. She never wavered for lack of time, energy, or focus. So, I often summon up my memories of Stephanie and her warmth and generosity. She is my emotional barometer, and her memory reminds me to be more selfless, more open, and more loving.

As she battled melanoma, Stephanie shared her extraordinary warmth and compassion with a new "family." I met them when she invited me to log-in to her melanoma support community. Once there, I found that she didn't just join the online group, rather she became entwined in the fabric of the community. I knew from speaking with her that Stephanie was drawing strength and comfort from her interaction with the other patients and their families, but when I read the community posts, I quickly realized that she was also very busy helping many of her friends in the melanoma community accomplish a wide variety of goals—finding ways to pay for travel and lodging for an endless succession of treatments and experimental studies, sharing information and research, giving advice on how to put financial and personal affairs in order.

And then there was the emotional support. She was so deeply connected to so many other individuals and families battling cancer. Even on days when I had spoken with her and knew her to be physically and emotionally exhausted to the core, she supported her friends with online posts that were brave and sincere and full of certainty and optimism.

When Stephanie wrote an e-mail or a post her closing was always "Love and Light." So I will close with that: To you Stephanie, to your love and your light, and all of the goodness that came into this world and into our lives because of you. May you continue to inspire us to make an impact in our professions, communities, and in our personal lives. May your example help us to embrace our friends and families with your same warmth, passion, and compassion. And may we grow to embody your courage and optimism.

My heart is with your beloved Neil, your family, and all those who were lucky enough to share your friendship. You are missed terribly.